

THE BEAST OF BABYLON: extract

Hammurabi eyed the prisoner curiously. He had claimed to be a doctor not a spy, but could not explain how he had emerged from inside the strange blue cabinet that had appeared in the middle of the temple. Hammurabi feared magic, and this man was a sorcerer, there was no doubt about it. A sorcerer and a spy. This was a worm that could destroy the whole fruit. Hadn't his priests warned him against just such an infiltrator? He was frightened. He had to save his city and protect his people, so the sorcerer had to be got rid of quickly before he had time to spread his poison.

Hammurabi had hastily rounded up three judges, who had been enjoying lunch together in one of the taverns near the river, and he had instructed them what the punishment should be. This way, the sorcerer's death could act as an offering to Marduk.

The chief judge now raised his hand to deliver the sentence. 'Cut out the spy's heart,' he shouted.

'Which one?' said the sorcerer, a mad grin on his white-skinned face.

'You will be silent,' screeched the chief judge.

'I will *not*, actually,' said the sorcerer. 'I always understood that the great and wise Hammurabi was a *just* king. A king who was proud of the laws he had written down. A king who would always let an accused man defend himself and not call him guilty without fair trial.'

'There is nothing you can say that will change my mind,' said Hammurabi, fearing that the sorcerer would use clever words and magic to cloud his mind. He would not listen. He *must* not listen. 'The law is the law. And the punishment for spies and sorcerers is to have their hearts cut out.'

‘*Nothing* I can say?’ shouted the sorcerer. ‘What if I told you that you are in very great danger? What if I told you that your nice city, your kingdom, your empire, your *whole world* was about to be attacked by a being of such immense power that it will make your army look like toy soldiers, and when it’s done with you there will be nothing left of mighty Babylon except ashes and cinders?’

‘My priests have already warned me,’ said Hammurabi, waving a hand dismissively.

‘Really?’ The sorcerer raised his eyebrows. ‘They’re cleverer than they look.’

‘And it is clear that *you* are the threat they warned me of.’

‘Wait, listen to me –’

‘Enough of this,’ said the chief judge. ‘The sentence must be carried out.’

‘No. You must listen to me!’ The sorcerer looked worried for the first time. He struggled as four guards grabbed him and roughly dragged him towards the execution stone.

‘The Starman is coming!’ he yelled. ‘The Great Beast! And I’m the only one who can stop it!’

From his vantage point on the royal balcony Gurgurum could see the man struggling as he was forced over the execution stone. He had heard his words and they’d made him uneasy. Gurgurum was a man utterly fearless in battle, yet now he felt the pricking of uncertainty.

The great beast of legend was coming ... that was what the prisoner had said. What form would the Beast take? Where would it come from? How could they defend themselves against it?

The histories recorded the stories of the old gods. All the constellations in the sky

were gods. The Babylonian zodiac taught children their names, and their parents used them to frighten them into obedience. It had been hundreds of years since the gods had walked the Earth. Would the Beast come down from the heavens in the form of a monstrous bull, a scorpion, a great lion? Or would it be some new and terrible monster?

He laughed at himself. He was behaving as if he was a little boy again, frightened of shadows. There were no monsters coming.

He heard a sound and turned quickly, his senses alert to any danger, peering into the darkness of the king's chambers.

And his heart throbbed in his chest.

It was here.

The Great Beast.

It was upon them.